

BEDFORDSHIRE BENEFITS NETWORK

NOTES OF MEETING

2.00 pm, Thursday 2nd April 2020
Emergency online meeting

Present

Elliott Stephenson - Chair	Grand Union Housing Group
Len Simkins - Facilitator	BAF / Infotrain
Karen Banfield	Citizens Advice Leighton Linlade
Edward Costello	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Kim Daisley	One Support Bedford
John Edwards	Money Advice at St Andrews
Wendy Jephcote	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Christina King	Citizens Advice Mid Bedfordshire
Yasmina Mahmood	Adult Services - Bedford Borough Council
Helen McHugh	Autism Bedfordshire
Lindsay Measures	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Bonita Murphy	DWP
Katy Ruffles	Housing – Central Bedfordshire Council
Amanda Ryan	Bpha
JP Smith	Hightown Housing Association
Philippa Ward	Carers in Bedfordshire

Apologies

Fsella Afzal-Pagliari	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Karina Chamberlain	Macmillan Welfare Rights Service (Luton)
Noor D'Agositno	Catalyst Housing
Julie Luckman	Revenues and Benefits - Central Bedfordshire Council
Julie May	Citizens Advice Mid Bedfordshire
Jenny Pulling	Citizens Advice Mid Bedfordshire
Bhavani Sarma	Macmillan Welfare Rights Service – Central Bedfordshire Council

This Benefits Network meeting was organised by



on behalf of

Bedfordshire
Advice Forum

In partnership with



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Item	Subject	Action
1	Introductions and apologies – and protocols for the meeting	
	<p>This emergency meeting had been called in response to the new benefit rules that had been introduced as part of the national Coronavirus crisis.</p> <p>Elliott Stephenson hosted and chaired the meeting. Elliott welcomed everybody and explained the protocols for the online meeting. The meeting would be recorded and the recording would be circulated. (NB Unfortunately the recording did not work properly and these notes have been produced instead).</p> <p>Introductions were made. Apologies for absence were taken later. Some people could not attend the meeting and some others had some technical issues in joining the meeting.</p>	
2	New benefit rules in response to the Coronavirus crisis	
	<p>Elliott went through the main changes relating to: SSP/ESA; Universal Credit; Working Tax Credit; Housing Benefit (and Local Housing Allowance) and Council Tax Support.</p> <p>The benefit changes affect people in work and out of work.</p> <p>The Government will also be providing financial support to employers to help pay employees' wages (Job Retention Scheme), and to some self-employed people for loss of income.</p> <p>Elliott referred to the following information sources during the presentation:</p> <p>www.understandinguniversalcredit.gov.uk/coronavirus/</p> <p>www.moneyadvice.service.gov.uk/en/articles/coronavirus-what-it-means-for-you</p> <p>www.guhg.co.uk/coronavirus/information-for-customers-affected-financially-by-coronavirus/</p> <p>https://111.nhs.uk/covid-19</p> <p>www.rightsnet.org.uk/resources/benefit-tax-credit-rates</p> <p>www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/info/53/benefits/751/coronavirus_benefits</p> <p>www.bedford.gov.uk/benefits-and-support/benefits-council-tax-support/council-tax-support/</p> <p>www.litr.org.uk/latest-news/news/200331-how-do-work-changes-affect-tax-credits</p>	

There were various questions and discussions on the different benefit issues raised by Elliott. Key points were:

SSP / ESA

- If Coronavirus related, **Statutory Sick Pay** is now paid from Day 1 (instead of Day 4), and **New Style ESA** is payable from Day 1 (instead of Day 8)
- **Fit notes** to claim SSP/ESA can be arranged on the 111 website.
- DWP are putting their **trust in customers**, if they report they are affected by Coronavirus.

Universal Credit

- DWP are advising people to claim UC, if their employer is not paying them 80% of their normal wages, while furloughed under the **Government Job Retention Scheme**.
- Jobcentres are calling new claimants to **verify their ID**. They are prioritising the vulnerable.
- There is an **increase of £1,000 a year** in the personal allowance in UC (and Working Tax Credit). No action is required to receive this extra money

Unemployed

- The DWP **focus is on getting all new UC claimants online and set up** for UC as quickly as possible.
- The **claimant commitments regarding jobseeking** have been put on hold for UC claimants. This will relieve the stress for unemployed claimants, especially the vulnerable. However, claimants should still check their journals every few days.

Self-employed

- The **Minimum Income Floor** will be temporarily relaxed during the crisis, starting on 6th April. This means those who are self-employed do not have to be earning the minimum wage level to qualify as self-employed.
- It is not clear yet whether the self-employed will have to pay back any UC they receive, if they get help from the **Government support scheme for the self-employed** in June. But the advice should be to encourage somebody who is self-employed, and on a low income, to claim UC. At least they will have some income now, even if some form of repayment is required later.
- The support scheme for the self-employed does not cover all self-employed people, with possibly up to **2 million being excluded** for different reasons

Jobcentre Plus offices

- Many **staff** are still going into the JCP offices to work – with many working long hours and having to make difficult journeys to work. Bonita praised the great commitment of her colleagues
- Regarding the **Bedford JCP office**, if there are problems, the public, especially the vulnerable, can ring 01234 361636
- **Advisers can also ring Bonita directly** on 01234 361736, if they need help with a particular case.

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support

Julie Luckman (CBC) had sent through some information on HB and CTS for the meeting, which is summarised below:

- **Local Housing Allowance rates will be increasing from April (to cover 30% of local market rents for different sized properties).** CBC will increase claimants' Housing Benefit as soon as they can. They are currently bottoming out the software to enable them to do this.
- **Additional earnings disregard in HB from the 6 April (from £17.10 to £37.10 a week)** – This will ensure the national WTC increase is not clawed back through HB. Currently awaiting the software to be able to do this. This is expected it soon.
- **Negative effect that WTC increases will have on CTS** – CBC are currently awaiting a response as to whether they can change their CTS scheme and increase the earnings disregard. Under current legislation LAs can't change their CTS scheme in-year
- **£150 additional payment for CTS recipients** - CTS recipients will receive up to £150 towards Council Tax Liability. Some people will get less than £150, if their CTS award leaves less than £150 outstanding as CT liability. All being looked into. Software also nearly developed.

NB The following clarification was provided on HB and CTS after the meeting:

- The **increase in the LHA rates** should apply for the whole of 2020/21. There is no provision currently in place to change the rates back to the originally intended rates for the year. However, all the rates will be reviewed for 2021/22.
- Although there is no official CBC policy in place at the moment about the additional £150 for CTS recipients, it is likely to apply for existing claimants as at 1 April 2020 and new claimants during 2020/21. However, as the money will come from a cash-limited budget, it might be that, if the budget is spent by a certain date in 2020/21, then there would be no further extra CTS support possible after that date. However, all these decisions are still in the melting pot at this stage.

3	Any other business	
3.1	An emergency BAF meeting was held earlier today to discuss the issues affecting advice sector organisations as a result of the Coronavirus crisis. The CVS will be sending out a short survey to BAF members to get an update on the current advice and support services being provided.	CVS
3.2	Thanks were given to everybody who took part in the emergency meeting today, with special thanks expressed to Elliott for hosting the meeting, and to Bonita for giving the updates from the DWP.	
4	Date of next meeting	
	<p>Another online meeting will be arranged, if there are any further major changes to benefits.</p> <p>However, even if there are not any major changes, it was agreed that it would be a good idea to hold a catch-up / review meeting in about a month's time.</p>	Len